

Public Hearing for S.B. 1085 – Testimony by Conley Monk, NVCLR

Written Testimony Concerning Proposed S.B. 1085, An Act Concerning the Legalization of the Retail Sale and Possession of Cannabis and Concerning Erasure of Criminal Records in the Case of Convictions Based on the Possession of a Small Amount of Cannabis

Distinguished members of the Committee on the Judiciary, my name is Conley Monk. I am the Co-Founder and Director of the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress (NVCLR) in New Haven. I support S.B. 1085 — An Act Concerning the Legalization of the Retail Sale and Possession of Cannabis and Concerning Erasure of Criminal Records in the Case of Convictions Based on the Possession of a Small Amount of Cannabis — as a veteran, and as someone whose life has been negatively impacted by Connecticut's unduly harsh and unjustifiably punitive criminalization of cannabis.

I volunteered to join the United States Marines Corps and was deployed to Vietnam in July 1969, when I was 20 years old. On the day I arrived in Vietnam, I was bombarded by enemy mortar rounds as I exited the plane. My unit was gassed the next morning. At night, enemy soldiers would try to infiltrate the base, and our unit and convoys were regularly attacked. I saw death everywhere, and did not know if I would make it out alive. When my unit was sent to Japan, I began to experience flashbacks, and was kept awake by nightmares. The military did not have the right term for it then, but I had developed severe post-traumatic stress disorder. To cope, I began self-medicating with drugs, and so received a "less-than-honorable" discharge from the Marines. My discharge status meant that I was ineligible for treatment at the VA.

I returned to Connecticut in 1971 with severe PTSD and an opioid addiction. With the support of my family, I was able to get clean, and in fact became a drug treatment counselor for other veterans returning home from Vietnam. I continued to struggle with undiagnosed PTSD, however. The anxiety, sleeplessness, and flashbacks made daily life almost impossible to get through. I found that cannabis was one of the only things that calmed me. And so, I used

Public Hearing for S.B. 1085 – Testimony by Conley Monk, NVCLR

cannabis on and off throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In this period of time, I got married, I continued working as a drug counselor, as a cab driver, and then at Yale New Haven Hospital, and worked towards a college degree. I had two children, and started my own construction company. Cannabis was one of the tools that allowed me to manage my PTSD symptoms well enough to rebuild my life, especially after recovering from an opioid addiction.

In 1982, however, I was arrested for marijuana possession in West Haven. I was sentenced to 18 months' probation. I stopped using cannabis, and unfortunately suffered a relapse in the 1990s. I overcame my opioid addiction again, however, and although I struggle with PTSD to this very day, I serve my community as the Director of National Veterans Council for Legal Redress. It would mean a great deal to me to have erased this almost forty-year-old conviction for possessing what was for me a life-stabilizing medicine.

I have been an advocate for veterans struggling with PTSD, with substance use disorders, and with other aftereffects of combat for decades. I have also been a resident of Connecticut for almost my entire life. From those experiences, I can tell you two things. First, for those of us veterans who have struggled with PTSD and opioid addiction, cannabis works. It reduces anxiety, pain, and dependency on more harmful substances, and allows us to live better lives. It is short-sighted and cruel for the VA to continue to deny medical certification to the veterans it serves. Connecticut can and should make accessing medical marijuana easier for all veterans, including those with less-than-honorable discharges.

Second, people in this state, like my younger self, are going to use cannabis, some medicinally, some recreationally, regardless of whether it is legal. It is up to this legislature to decide how Connecticut will respond moving forward.

Public Hearing for S.B. 1085 – Testimony by Conley Monk, NVCLR

I ask the members of this Committee to understand that the full and equitable legalization of cannabis is a veterans' issue, as well as an issue of economic and racial justice. I urge the members of this Committee not only to pass S.B. 1085, but to support the inclusion of provisions in the full marijuana legalization package that would remove barriers to marijuana access for Connecticut veterans using VA healthcare. I also ask that the Committee include provisions in S.B. 1089, An Act Concerning Cannabis in the Workplace, that would protect employees, and especially palliative use patients, from termination for cannabis use alone. Thank you for your time.